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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 000734

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SUBJECT: ALGERIA'S HAMAS PARTY: A WINNING ORGANIZATION?  
  
REF: ALGIERS 437

11. (U) CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR RONALD NEUMANN,  
AMEMBASSY ALGIERS, REASON 1.5 D.

12. (C) SUMMARY: IN THE LAST TWO YEARS, THE FOCUS  
IN ISLAMIST POLITICS HERE HAS SHIFTED TO THE LEGAL  
ISLAMIC PARTY HAMAS (NO RELATION TO PALESTINIAN  
HAMAS) AWAY FROM THE BANNED ISLAMIC SALVATION FRONT  
(FIS). SOME OBSERVERS SUGGEST THAT WERE THE FIS  
ALLOWED TO RETURN TO THE SCENE, THE POPULAR BASE OF  
HAMAS WOULD VANISH (WE ARE SKEPTICAL). HAMAS'  
LEADER, MAHFOUD NAHNAH IS NOT AS GIFTED AN ORATOR AS  
SOME FIS LEADERS, AND HIS GRADUALIST APPROACH TO  
GAINING POWER DIMINISHES HIS APPEAL AMONG HARDER  
LINE ISLAMISTS.

13. SUMMARY CONTINUED: THE FIS, HOWEVER, NO LONGER  
EXISTS AS AN ORGANIZATION IN ALGERIA WHILE HAMAS HAS  
A RECENT NATIONAL ORGANIZATION WITH EXPERIENCE FROM  
TWO NATIONAL ELECTIONS BEHIND IT. IN ADDITION,  
HAMAS HAS CLOSE TIES TO NON-POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS  
AND CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS. THE NEW GOVERNMENT LAW  
REGULATING PARTIES MAY LIMIT HAMAS' LINKS WITH  
SUCH GROUPS. STILL, HAMAS' BIGGEST ORGANIZATIONAL  
WEAKNESS SEEMS TO BE NAHNAH'S DOMINATION OF THE  
PARTY. WERE HE SUDDENLY TO DEPART THE SCENE, A  
POWER VACUUM AT THE TOP COULD SERIOUSLY DISRUPT  
HAMAS--UNLIKE THE FIS IN 1991 WHEN ITS TOP  
LEADERSHIP WAS ARRESTED, BUT THE FIS WENT ON TO WIN  
NATIONAL ELECTIONS NONETHELESS. END SUMMARY.

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COMPETITION BETWEEN THE FIS AND HAMAS  
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14. (C) HAMAS HAS GAINED PRESTIGE, AND VOTER  
STRENGTH, SINCE THE ISLAMIC SALVATION FRONT WAS  
BANNED IN 1992, BUT SOME THINK HAMAS WOULD DISAPPEAR  
IF THE FIS WERE ALLOWED TO RETURN. DEDICATED FIS  
SYMPATHIZERS BLAME HAMAS PRESIDENT MAHFOUD NAHNAH  
FOR HAVING SPLIT THE ALGERIAN ISLAMIST MOVEMENT IN  
1990 (BY SETTING UP HAMAS). IN ADDITION,  
HARDER-LINE ISLAMISTS REJECT NAHNAH'S GRADUALIST  
APPROACH TO GAINING POWER; THEY ALSO ACCUSE NAHNAH  
OF COLLABORATING WITH THE GOVERNMENT (IN A WIDELY  
WATCHED FEBRUARY 21 MBC TELEVISION BROADCAST, A  
CALLER FROM LONDON LABELLED NAHNAH A GOVERNMENT  
'AGENT.') MOREOVER, NAHNAH HIMSELF DOES NOT HAVE  
THE CHARISMA OF SOME FIS OFFICIALS, NOTABLY JAILED  
VICE PRESIDENT ALI BENHADJ.

INSIDE THE PARTY STRUCTURE  
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15. (C) SHEIKH NAHNAH AND HIS HAMAS PARTY CARRY  
SOME BAGGAGE, BUT THEY HAVE A RELATIVELY ORDERLY  
PARTY WITH PARTICULAR STRENGTHS. SHEIKH NAHNAH  
DOMINATES A PARTY VERY MUCH HIS CREATION; THERE IS  
LITTLE OF THE DISORDER SO APPARENT INSIDE THE FIS IN  
THE EARLY 1990'S. NAHNAH IS THE HEAD OF THE PARTY'S  
"EXECUTIVE COUNCIL," (IN ARABIC, MAJLES ET-TANFITH),

JOINED THERE BY NINE STAFFERS. THOSE AIDES FOCUS ON DISTINCT FUNCTIONS SUCH AS MEDIA RELATIONS, LEGISLATIVE WORK (HAMAS HAS FIVE MEMBERS IN THE SURROGATE PARLIAMENT), ISSUES DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNAL ADMINISTRATION. MOST MAJOR POLICY ISSUES ARE DEBATED WITHIN THIS "EXECUTIVE COUNCIL." A "CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL" (MAJLES ESH-SHOURA) SETS BROADER GUIDANCE, BUT ITS 100 PLUS MEMBERS, WHO COME FROM ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, MEET IRREGULARLY.

WHICH MAINTAINS A MONOLITHIC FACE  
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16. (C) NOTABLY, HAMAS MAINTAINS ENOUGH ORDER WITHIN ITS SENIOR RANKS TO GUARD MANY SECRETS. FOR EXAMPLE, VERY LITTLE OF THE INTERNAL DEBATE INSIDE THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL FILTERS OUTSIDE. REPORTERS FROM THE ARABIC-LANGUAGE DAILIES EL-ALEM ES-SIYASI AND EL-KHABER, WHICH CARRY THE BEST REPORTING ON ISLAMISTS HERE, CONFESS TO HAVING GREAT DIFFICULTY PUSHING THEIR HAMAS SOURCES PAST THE OFFICIAL LINE TO DESCRIBE DEBATES INSIDE THE PARTY. ITS OFFICIALS ARE SIMILARLY RETICENT WITH US.

NOT ALL READILY AGREED INSIDE THE MACHINE  
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17. (C) WHILE KEPT QUIET, THERE HAVE BEEN SOME HOT POLITICAL ARGUMENTS INSIDE HAMAS. NAHNAH'S DECISION IN 1995 TO RUN FOR PRESIDENT WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT'S GUIDELINES PROMPTED TWO HAMAS MAJLES ASH-SHOURA MEMBERS TO QUIT THE PARTY. ONE OF THEM TOLD POLOFF FEBRUARY 23 THAT THE ARGUMENT INSIDE THE MAJLES FOCUSSED ON WHETHER HAMAS WAS HELPING THE GOVERNMENT BY JOINING THE 1995 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN. NAHNAH AND HIS ALLIES IN THE COUNCIL REPORTEDLY ARGUED THAT HAMAS COULD GAIN CONFIDENCE OF SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AND PERHAPS EVEN SOME GOVERNMENT POSTS, IF THEY PLAYED THE PRESIDENCY'S GAME.

18. (C) THERE HAVE BEEN OTHER DISPUTES AS WELL. FOR EXAMPLE, ACCORDING TO THE LOCAL PRESS AND ONE HAMAS OFFICIAL, THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL'S DECISION LAST NOVEMBER NOT TO URGE ALGERIANS TO VOTE AGAINST THE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS, WHICH INCLUDED STRICTURES AGAINST MIXING RELIGION AND POLITICS, ALSO STIRRED CONTROVERSY. SIMILARLY, ALGERIAN NEWSPAPERS THIS WEEK HAVE REPORTED THAT SOME IN THE HAMAS LEADERSHIP REJECT DELETING ISLAMIC REFERENCES FROM HAMAS' NAME (HAMAS IS AN ACRONYM FOR 'MOVEMENT FOR AN ISLAMIC SOCIETY') IN ORDER TO COMPLY WITH THE NEW POLITICAL PARTY LAW. THE PRESS HAS SPECULATED THAT WITH NAHNAH OUTSIDE OF ALGERIA--HE TRAVELS ABROAD FREQUENTLY--INTERNAL DEBATES INSIDE THE PARTY ARE DIFFICULT TO SETTLE. PUBLICLY, HOWEVER, HAMAS USUALLY PRESENTS A SINGLE PARTY LINE WHICH CONTRASTS TO THE SHARP PUBLIC DISCORD IN THE NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT AND THE SOCIALIST FORCES FRONT, FOR EXAMPLE.

A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION  
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19. (C) HAMAS HAS A NATIONAL POLITICAL ORGANIZATION THE ENVY OF MOST OTHER ALGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES. OUTSIDE ALGIERS, IT HAS OFFICES WORKING THE STREETS OF NEARLY ALL OF ALGERIA'S 48 STATES (IN ALGERIAN VERNACULAR, WILAYAS), ACCORDING TO BOTH PARTY OFFICIALS AND POLITICAL JOURNALISTS. A SENIOR HAMAS OFFICIAL TOLD POLOFF RECENTLY THAT THE PARTY STRUCTURE REACHES EVEN THE COUNTY LEVEL (DAIRA) IN SOME WILAYAS. THE ORGANIZATION ALSO HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF TWO NATIONAL POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, THOSE OF 1991 AND 1995, BEHIND IT. IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS, HAMAS HAS STARTED TUNING ITS WILAYA ENGINES AGAIN WITH MEETINGS CRISS-CROSSING ALGERIA. NOTABLY, HAMAS IS WORKING WESTERN ALGERIA, OFTEN THE ORPHAN OF ALGERIAN POLITICS. (COMMENT: OFFICIAL

FIGURES STATED THAT NAHNAH WON 40 PERCENT OF THE VOTES IN ORAN, ALGERIA'S SECOND LARGEST WILAYA IN 1995. PRIVATELY, THE SHEIKH'S AIDES SAY THEY CAPTURED ABOUT 50 PERCENT, AND WON CLEAR MAJORITIES IN SOME ORAN DAIRAS. END COMMENT.)

#### HAMAS WOMEN'S GROUP

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¶10. (C) AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE HAMAS ORGANIZATION IS ITS SPECIAL SECTION OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS, DIRECTED BY A WOMAN FROM THE BERBER KABYLIE REGION, MALIKA CHABANI. CHABANI DIRECTS BRANCHES IN MOST MAJOR ALGERIAN CITIES. THESE GROUPS UNDERTAKE COMMUNITY PROJECTS, RANGING FROM TEACHING SEWING AND KNITTING TO LITERACY COURSES. POLITICAL OBSERVERS HERE IN 1995 TOLD US THAT THE HAMAS WOMEN ACTIVISTS WERE ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE IN DOOR-TO-DOOR CAMPAIGNING, TARGETING WOMEN IN LOWER-INCOME DISTRICTS IN AN UNMATCHED STYLE OF DIRECT POLITICS. A JOURNALIST WHO HAS STUDIED THESE GROUPS TOLD POLOFF IN FEBRUARY THAT THEY HAVE REDUCED THEIR ACTIVITIES IN RECENT MONTHS IN ORDER TO MAINTAIN A LOWER PROFILE WITH SUSPICIOUS GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES.

#### AND ALLIES IN ASSOCIATIONS

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¶11. (C) HAMAS ALSO RECEIVES HELP FROM TWO OFFICIALLY NON-POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS. THE NATIONAL CHARITY ASSOCIATION, "EL-ISLAH WEL-IRSHAD" ('REFORM AND GUIDANCE') WAS ESTABLISHED BY NAHNAH IN THE MID 1980'S BEFORE ISLAMIST PARTIES WERE LEGAL. ONE RESEARCHER TOLD US HAMAS IS VIRTUALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE CHARITY GROUP, AS THEIR NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEADERSHIPS ARE NEARLY IDENTICAL. EL-ISLAH DONATES FOOD AND CLOTHING TO THE POOR, AND HAS AN ACTIVE RAMADAN MEAL PROGRAM. IT ALSO WORKS WITH HOME-BASED INDUSTRY PROJECTS WITH ALGERIAN WOMEN. ACCORDING TO JOURNALISTS, SOME OF ITS MEMBERS OPERATE OPENLY FROM PARTICULAR MOSQUES IN WILAYAS SUCH AS ALGIERS AND BLIDA (NAHNAH'S HOMETOWN). DURING THE 1995 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, MANY EL-ISLAH ACTIVISTS UNDERTOOK DOOR-TO-DOOR CAMPAIGNING ON BEHALF OF CANDIDATE NAHNAH, ACCORDING TO JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL PARTY SOURCES.

¶12. (C) SIMILARLY, THE GENERAL UNION OF FREE STUDENTS (UGEL), ACTIVE ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES, ALSO HAS CLOSE LINKS TO THE HAMAS PARTY, ACCORDING TO A VARIETY OF SOURCES. TWO UGEL LEADERS TOLD US FEBRUARY 5 THAT THE UNION HAS 46,000 MEMBERS. THE UGEL'S MAIN WORK IS ON STUDENT ISSUES, SUCH AS CAMPUS HOUSING AND TRANSPORT. THE UGEL OFFICIALS SAID SOME MEMBERS SUPPORT NON-ISLAMIST PARTIES, BUT THEY RECOGNIZED THE UGEL'S PREVIOUS SUPPORT FOR HAMAS. DURING THE 1995 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, MANY UGEL MEMBERS CAMPAIGNED ACTIVELY FOR NAHNAH, ACCORDING TO JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL PARTY SOURCES.

¶13. (C) THE PRESIDENT OF BLIDA UNIVERSITY TOLD POLOFF IN DECEMBER THAT THE UGEL IS BY FAR THE MOST ACTIVE OF THE STUDENT GROUPS ON HIS CAMPUS; HE ESTIMATED THE BLIDA CHAPTER HAD "SEVERAL HUNDRED" MEMBERS ON A CAMPUS OF 17,000 STUDENTS. THE PRESIDENT ALLEGED THAT THE UGEL CHAPTER'S FUNDING COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE HAMAS PARTY. THE UGEL LEADERS SAID ONLY THAT FUNDING COMES FROM A VARIETY OF LOCAL SOURCES; THEY WOULD NOT CONFIRM THAT HAMAS PROVIDES FINANCING.

#### IN SOME MOSQUES TOO

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¶14. (C) POLITICAL PARTY AND JOURNALIST SOURCES ALSO ALLEGE THAT HAMAS HAS A NETWORK OF SUPPORT AMONG VARIOUS MOSQUES. ONE INFORMED REPORTER

CLAIMED THAT A MEMBER OF HAMAS' MAJLIS ASH-SHURA GIVES THE FRIDAY SERMON MOST WEEKS AT THE MAIN MOSQUE IN THE ALGIERS DISTRICT OF BACHDJARRAH (WHERE THIS SOURCE LIVES). AN ISLAMIST DOCTOR WITH FAMILY IN THE LARBA, OUTSIDE ALGIERS, CLAIMS THAT THE IMAM AT THE MAIN MOSQUE IN LARBA IS A HAMAS ACTIVIST; THE GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS HIM IN ORDER TO STEM THE TIDE OF EXTREMISM IN THE VIOLENCE-PLAGUED TOWN. SIMILARLY, WE HAVE HEARD FROM SEVERAL SOURCES THAT HAMAS ACTIVISTS ARE PROMINENT IN MOSQUES IN BLIDA, NAHNAH'S HOME TOWN.

WHERE DO THEY GET THEIR MONEY?

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¶15. (C) LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT HAMAS FINANCING OUTSIDE THE PARTY, BUT THE NEWLY PASSED PARTY LAW, WHICH GOVERNS FINANCING, MAY IMPEDE HAMAS' FUNDRAISING. HAMAS OFFICIALS WERE VISIBLY UNHAPPY WITH THE NEWLY PASSED PARTY LAW'S CEILING ON INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS (THE LIMIT IS DA 450--IE. USD 8--MONTHLY). IN PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS WITH US, HAMAS OFFICIALS HAVE IMPLIED THAT THEY HAVE WEALTHY CONTRIBUTORS LOCALLY. IN ADDITION, MANY OBSERVERS HERE THINK HAMAS RECEIVES FINANCIAL HELP FROM SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZE BUSINESSES IN TOWNS SUCH AS BLIDA. FINALLY, SEVERAL POLITICAL JOURNALISTS--BOTH PRO- AND ANTI-ISLAMIST--ASSUME THAT HAMAS RECEIVES FUNDS FROM PRIVATE SOURCES IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA. (COMMENT: THE NEW PARTY LAW WOULD BAN SUCH CONTRIBUTIONS. END COMMENT.)

COMMENT

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¶16. (C) HAMAS PROBABLY WILL COMPLETELY ECLIPSE THE FIS--DESPITE GOA EFFORTS TO SUPPRESS TOTALLY THIS ORGANIZATION--WITHIN ALGERIA'S ISLAMIST MOVEMENT. MANY DEDICATED SUPPORTERS OF THE FIS ARE LIKELY TO REMAIN OPPOSED TO ANY AFFILIATION WITH HAMAS, PARTICULARLY SINCE MANY ALSO BELIEVE NAHNAH WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR BETRAYING AN EARLIER ARMED ISLAMIST LEADER (BOUYALI) IN THE 1980'S.

¶17. (C) NONETHELESS, WE ARE SKEPTICAL OF CLAIMS THAT HAMAS' FOLLOWING WOULD EVAPORATE WERE THE FIS TO BE AGAIN ALLOWED TO FUNCTION LEGALLY. FOR ONE THING, A PORTION OF FORMER FIS SUPPORTERS ARE REPULSED BY THE TERRORISM FOR WHICH THEY HOLD THE FIS ACCOUNTABLE. IN ADDITION, HAMAS ALSO HAS DEVELOPED A DISTINCT BASE OF ITS OWN, LARGELY THROUGH PATIENT GRASSROOTS WORK. DURING THE UPCOMING LEGISLATIVE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, HAMAS WILL SEEK TO BROADEN ITS APPEAL TO THE MASS OF FIS VOTERS FROM 1990 AND 1991 WHO PRESUMABLY SEEK ALTERNATIVES AFTER YEARS OF DISAPPOINTMENT. IN 1995, MANY OF THESE VOTERS TURNED TO PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE NAHNAH. (ACCORDING TO THE OFFICIAL RESULTS, NAHNAH WON 25 PERCENT--ABOUT 2.8 MILLION VOTES--IN THE 1995 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. WE EVEN HEARD STORIES THAT ARMED GROUPS URGED VOTERS IN SOME ALGIERS NEIGHBORHOODS TO VOTE FOR NAHNAH.)

¶18. (C) THERE ARE TWO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUNDAMENTAL STRENGTH OF THE HAMAS ORGANIZATION. FIRST, THE NEW LAW REGULATING POLITICAL PARTIES OUTLAWES LINKS BETWEEN POLITICAL PARTIES AND NON-POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS, SUCH AS STUDENT GROUPS AND CHARITY ORGANIZATIONS. HAMAS WILL REORGANIZE THESE TIES WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE LAW. SECOND, SOME DOUBT THAT HAMAS COULD MAINTAIN COHESION IF NAHNAH DEPARTS THE SCENE SUDDENLY. INDEED, THE FOCUS ON NAHNAH PREVENTS OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HAMAS EXECUTIVE COUNCIL AND MAJLES ASH-SHOURA FROM BUILDING THEIR OWN REPUTATIONS. (BY CONTRAST, THE FIS HAD, IN BASEBALL TERMS, "DEEP DEPTH;" WHEN ABASSI MADANI AND BENHADJ WERE ARRESTED IN JUNE 1991, ABDELKADER HACHANI AND MOHAMED SAID ABLY LED

THE PARTY TO ELECTORAL VICTORY IN DECEMBER.) HAMAS ' SECOND ECHELON LEADERS ARE USUALLY UNDER FORTY YEARS OLD, AND THEY HAVE TIME TO BUILD THEIR NATIONAL CREDENTIALS. MOREOVER, WITH HAMAS EXPECTED TO WIN MANY SEATS IN THE NEXT, ELECTED PARLIAMENT, THESE YOUNGER LEADERS MAY GAIN A MORE PROMINENT ROLE. OVER COMING WEEKS, IF TIME AND RESOURCES PERMIT, WE WILL DEVELOP DETAILS ON THE FUTURE LEADERS OF ALGERIA'S DOMINANT ISLAMIST ORGANIZATION.

NEUMANN